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Ex-Security Agency Employee Said to Have Admitted Spying

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BALTIMORE, Nov. 27 — Ronald William Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency, admitted spying for the Soviet Union an hour after he was confronted with the case against him, a Federal investigator testified today.

At a hearing that ended with denial of bail for Mr. Pelton, David Faulkner, an agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, said Mr. Pelton acknowledged that on three occasions he passed classified information about the secret code-breaking agency to Soviet agents. Mr. Faulkner said Mr. Pelton told of fears that the Soviet agents might try to silence him.

Under cross-examination, a defense attorney, Fred Warren Bennett, asked Mr. Faulkner if he had questioned Mr. Pelton about "ivy bells," Mr. Warren later identified "ivy bells" as an electronic eavesdropping project at the security agency. According to intelligence specialists, "bells," as a five-letter word, would indicate a project at the highest level of security.

United States Magistrate Daniel Klein refused to allow Mr. Faulkner to answer the question. A Federal affidavit filed by the Government asserts that Mr. Pelton disclosed details of a security agency project to collect intelligence on the Soviet Union.

Magistrate Finds a Risk

After a two-and-a-half-hour hearing, Magistrate Klein said the case against Mr. Pelton was "substantial" and that there was a risk he would flee or harm the security of the United States if released. Mr. Pelton is charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, which carries a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Magistrate Klein rejected an offer by Mr. Pelton's parents and his employer to post cash and property as bond. Mr. Pelton worked for the security agency from 1965 to 1979.

Mr. Pelton, a trim, baldish man who wore a casual shirt and slacks, kept his head bowed throughout much of the

proceedings. At times, he doodled on a pad and nervously played with a rubber band in his hands.

Behind him sat his estranged wife, Judith, and his 21-year old married daughter, Paula White. Mrs. Pelton and her husband separated in July, according to Mr. Bennett, who said that she had agreed that he could return to the family home in suburban Washington if he was freed on bail.

Mr. Faulkner, the F.B.I. agent, said he and a partner interviewed Mr. Pelton for three hours Sunday morning at an Annapolis hotel. Mr. Pelton, he said, initially refused to discuss classified information with the two agents until they assured him they had the appropriate security clearances.

After an hour of hypothetical discussions, Mr. Faulkner said, Mr. Pelton began admitting as fact material set forth in an affidavit filed earlier this week. According to that document, Mr. Pelton contacted officials at the Russian Embassy in 1980, several months after he had filed for bankruptcy in Maryland. Administration officials have said the information he provided to the Soviet Union about American efforts to intercept Russian communications represented a serious security breach.

Mr. Faulkner said there were two interviews with Mr. Pelton, the first lasting about four hours and a second Sunday evening that lasted an hour.

Question of Being Drunk

Warren Brown, another attorney for Mr. Pelton, suggested in cross-examination that his client may have been drunk at the second interview. Mr. Faulkner denied the assertion and said Mr. Pelton did not ask for a lawyer. In his questioning, Mr. Brown appeared to be laying the foundation for a future effort to suppress Mr. Pelton's statements to the bureau. Mr. Faulkner said the defendant did not sign a statement.

There was no recording of the sessions, at which Mr. Pelton repeatedly insisted that he intended to say nothing that would lead to his arrest, according to Mr. Faulkner. He was arrested just minutes after the second interview.

Mr. Bennett, in arguing for bond, gave some biographical details about Mr. Pelton. According to Mr. Bennett, Mr. Pelton was born in Benton Harbor, Mich., and was graduated from high school in 1960. He then joined the Air Force and served for four years. In 1965, he returned to Benton Harbor, where he worked for Sears Roebuck and Westinghouse before joining the security agency in 1965. From 1966 to 1972, Mr. Bennett said his client was stationed in Great Britain.

After leaving the security agency, he has held a succession of jobs, including freelance computer work and a position with a marine company.

At the opening of the hearing, Mr. Bennett tried to close it to the press, arguing that the pretrial publicity would harm his client's chances for a fair trial. Attorneys representing The Baltimore Sun and WMAR, a local television station, successfully argued that the Constitution barred closing such court proceedings except in rare circumstances.